

# Numismatic History of the Charlesfort / Santa Elena Site: The U.S. Marine Corps Maneuver Grounds

By Heathley A. Johnson

The site of the Charlesfort / Santa Elena National Historic Landmark on Parris Island, South Carolina, is best known for its 16<sup>th</sup> century French and Spanish occupations, but subsequently there were also two other intensive occupations. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a plantation complex, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States Marine Corps established its “Maneuver Grounds” camp on the site (Figure 1). The Maneuver Grounds was the location for one of the three phases of basic training of recruits prior to and during World War I and grew to become a large tent camp with various support buildings, such as mess halls, latrines, officer’s quarters, and a hospital complex (DePratter et al. 2016:149-158). When recruits began training at the Maneuver Grounds in 1916, it was still a modest affair, with expansion and building construction occurring in 1917 and 1918 (Legg 2005:123-125). Training at the camp ceased between 1919-1920, and the buildings were dismantled and salvaged in the 1920s. Following a period with no occupation during the 1930s and

1940s, when portions of the site were within the impact area of nearby artillery and aerial bombing ranges, a golf course was constructed in the late 1940s. Several golf holes and the clubhouse were located within the site boundary.

In nearly all excavations conducted at the Charlesfort / Santa Elena site, evidence of the Maneuver Grounds has been found. This evidence comes in the form of artifacts of a military or personal nature, and features, such as building footings, shell-lined roads, and refuse dumps. Commonly found personal artifacts include coins, clothing fasteners (snaps, buttons, rivets, and safety pins), hygienic and grooming items (toothbrushes, dental cream tube caps, combs, and razor blades), and items such as pipe stems and harmonica fragments. Based on recent reanalysis of the collection, coins are one of the most ubiquitous personal artifacts that have been recovered. A total of 161 coins have been found dating from 1884-1919 (Figure 2). The majority of these coins have been recovered from the upper level of the mixed context plow zone.

Coins dating to before and after the Maneuver Grounds occupation have also been recovered from the site, which could complicate the assignment of coins to any one period. For example, a farmer could have lost a coin at the site in the 1890s, or a golfer could have possessed and lost an old coin dating from the 1910s. This potential issue was resolved with a fair degree of certainty by first dividing the coins into date groupings, as follows: Plantation, with coin examples dating from 1735 to 1862; Maneuver Grounds, 1884 to 1919; and Golf Course, 1940 to 1997. For the date ranges of 1863 to 1883 and 1920 to 1939, no coins have been recovered. The coins from the Maneuver Grounds group were then examined to determine the amount of wear to their surfaces. Earlier coins belonging to the Maneuver Grounds occupation were expected to have a fair amount of wear, while later coins should have little wear; these expected wear patterns were seen to hold true. The coins followed a general trend in the reduction of the amount of wear, with coins from the 1880s having the most wear and coins



Figure 1: A 1918 photo of the USMC Maneuver Grounds training camp at the Charlesfort / Santa Elena site. (From a postcard)

## Maneuver Grounds Coinage

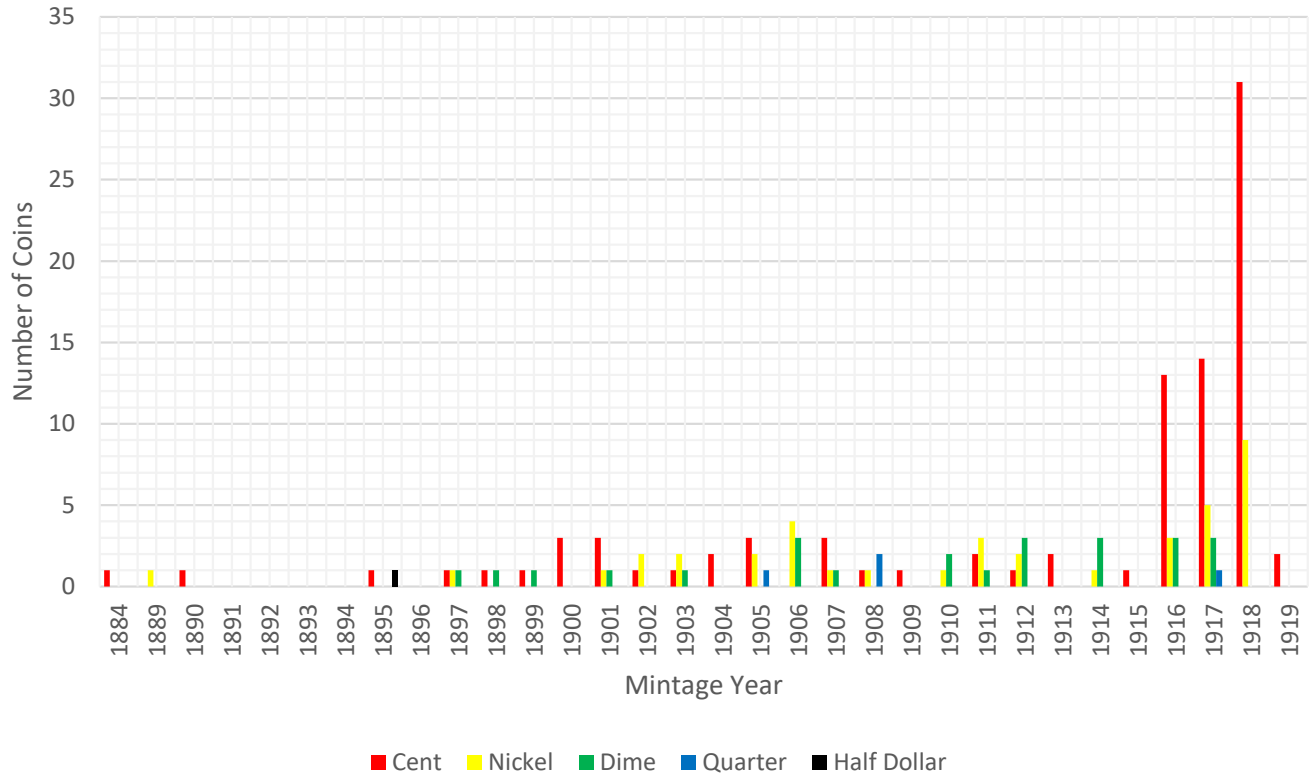


Figure 2: Graph of the coins from the Maneuver Grounds component of the Charlesfort / Santa Elena site showing coin type, mintage year, and number. (Graph by Heathley Johnson)

Coin Type	Mintage Years	Denver	New Orleans	Philadelphia	San Francisco
Small Cent, Indian Head Type, Variety 3	1864-1909			24	
Small Cent, Lincoln Type, Wheat Ears Reverse, Variety 1	1909-1942, 1944-1958	27		40	1
Nickel, Liberty Head Type, Variety 2	1883-1913			22	
Nickel, Indian Head Type, Variety 2	1913-1938	4		14	
Dime, Liberty Head Type	1892-1916	3	1	14	
Dime, Winged Liberty Head Type	1916-1945			5	1
Quarter, Liberty Head Type	1892-1916		2	1	
Quarter, Standing Liberty Type, Variety 2	1917-1930			1	
Half Dollar, Liberty Head Type	1892-1915			1	

Table 1: Coins from the Maneuver Grounds component of the Charlesfort / Santa Elena site. (Table by Heathley Johnson)





Figure 3: Coins from the Maneuver Grounds component of the Charlesfort / Santa Elena site. A) 1895 half dollar, B) 1908 quarter, C) 1917 quarter, D) 1914 dime, E) 1916 dime, F) 1906 nickel, G) 1918 nickel, H) 1905 cent, I) 1918 cent, J) Canadian 1905 25 cents. (Photos by Heathley Johnson)

from the 1910s having little noticeable wear. These findings coincide well with information from an U.S. Government Accountability Office (2011:29) report, which found that the average lifespan of a coin in circulation is about 30 years.

To provide context for coin information discussed below, a quick look at coin production and distribution in the U.S. will be beneficial. For the period covered by the Maneuver Grounds group, 1884 to 1919, coins were minted at five mints: Carson City, Denver, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. Not all coin types were minted at each mint. For example, the Carson City and New Orleans mints only produced gold and silver coins, so there are no cents or nickels from these mints. After mints produce coins, they are then distributed to one of the 12 Federal Reserve Banks or their branch offices, as well as to authorized private sector repositories. From there, coins are distributed to financial institutions and pass into circulation. This system initially produces a regional distribution of coins from a particular mint, followed by a wider dissemination as coins circulate. For example, coins minted in San Francisco will generally only be found on the west coast in the year of their mintage, but in later years are liable to be found anywhere. The various mints do not produce the same number of coins, with the Philadelphia mint generally producing a higher number than the other mints for the years covered. Often this difference is quite substantial, as the example of cents minted in 1918 shows: 288.1 million were minted at Philadelphia, 47.8 million in Denver, and 34.6 million in San Francisco (Yeoman 2015:118). This is due to differing population densities across the country, which affects regional demand for coinage.

The Maneuver Grounds coin collection contains examples from the Denver, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and San Francisco mints (Figure 3). It should be noted that some of the condition issues and toning of these coins are the result of being buried in the ground for decades and not reflective of how they would have appeared when lost. Table 1 shows the different coin types

recovered, their mintage years, where they were minted, and how many were found. Coins would have been brought to Parris Island by recruits from all over the eastern U.S. Recruits from the western U.S. received their basic training in California. This would produce an expected pattern of a higher percentage of coins from the Philadelphia mint being present.

Coins from the Philadelphia mint are the most prevalent in the collection, accounting for 75.8% of all coins. This may seem to be an expected finding, given the proximity of the Philadelphia mint to Parris Island, the coin types it minted, the high number of coins it produced, and where the Parris Island recruits came from, but there is another factor to consider. For the period covered by the Maneuver Grounds coins (1884-1919), some coins were only minted in Philadelphia for a portion of this time. Cents, for example, were only minted in Philadelphia through 1907, then also in San Francisco through 1910, and finally also in Denver starting in 1911. As cents constitute 57.1% of the collection, 25% of which date to 1907 or before, it is easy to see why coins from the Philadelphia mint are the most frequently recovered. Looking at only the cents minted between 1911 and 1919, when possible minting locations include all three mints, the ratio of coins changes considerably, with 40.9% from Denver,

57.6% from Philadelphia, and 1.5% from San Francisco. Nickels and dimes follow a somewhat similar pattern to a lesser degree, but coins from the Philadelphia mint compose the vast majority for these denominations. Quarters and half dollars are too few in number for any meaningful look at their mintage locations.

In addition to the 161 U.S. coins that have been recovered, a single foreign coin has been found—a 1905 Canadian 25 cents. It is not unusual to find Canadian coins circulating in the U.S. The Canadian 1, 5, 10, and 25 cents coins are very similar to the equivalent U.S. coins in size and metallic composition, allowing them to pass mostly unnoticed in general circulation.

Given the small portion of the Charlesfort / Santa Elena site that has been excavated and the number of coins from the Maneuver Grounds that have been found, there are likely thousands of coins still in the ground. This raises the question of why were so many coins lost? Part of the answer has to do with the sheer number of recruits that were trained at the Maneuver Grounds between 1916 and 1920—over 50 thousand, each of which would have spent several weeks at the camp. These recruits would have had little use for money while there, but there was a private post exchange, the Lucky Bag, in the camp where they could buy goods (DePratter et al. 2016:150). Coins were also more frequently used during this time period, when the cost of small goods was measured in cents, not dollars. For example, the cost of a first-class postage stamp in 1916 was two cents. The environment of the camp also played a role in why so many dropped coins went unrecovered. Period photographs show that the grounds of the camp were mostly sand, into which a dropped coin would likely disappear in rather short order. Recruits were housed in tents at the Maneuver Grounds, which seem to have been erected on raised rectangular platforms, footings of which have been frequently found during excavations (Legg 2005:129-130). While the exact construction method of these platforms is unknown, it



Figure 4: Copper alloy watch fob with attached 1912 cent from the Maneuver Grounds. (Photo by Heathley Johnson)



is likely that they were wooden platforms composed of planks, similar to those seen in Scout camps. Coins dropped inside of tents could then easily fall through the gaps between planks, becoming lost underneath the tent platforms. Finally, as a training camp, physical exercise would have been a regular occurrence at the Maneuver Grounds, increasing the chance for coins to be dislodged from the safety of trouser pockets.

One unusual artifact related to numismatics that has been found is a watch fob. The fob itself is a thin sheet of copper alloy that was gilded, upon which a 1912 cent from the Philadelphia mint was soldered (Figure 4). Perhaps the year 1912 had some significance to the owner, otherwise, this is a fairly prosaic watch fob.

The collection of coins from the Maneuver Grounds may not have great antiquity and be of lesser interest to numismatic enthusiasts and collectors, but it has value from an archaeological viewpoint. By looking at the varying

denominations, types, and mintage locations of the coins, an example of what coins were in general circulation in South Carolina in 1916-1920 is gained. It was a time when many coin designs had recently changed, providing more visual interest to those who may have viewed coins as more than just a medium of exchange. For the curious, the face value of the Maneuver Grounds coins is \$6.82.

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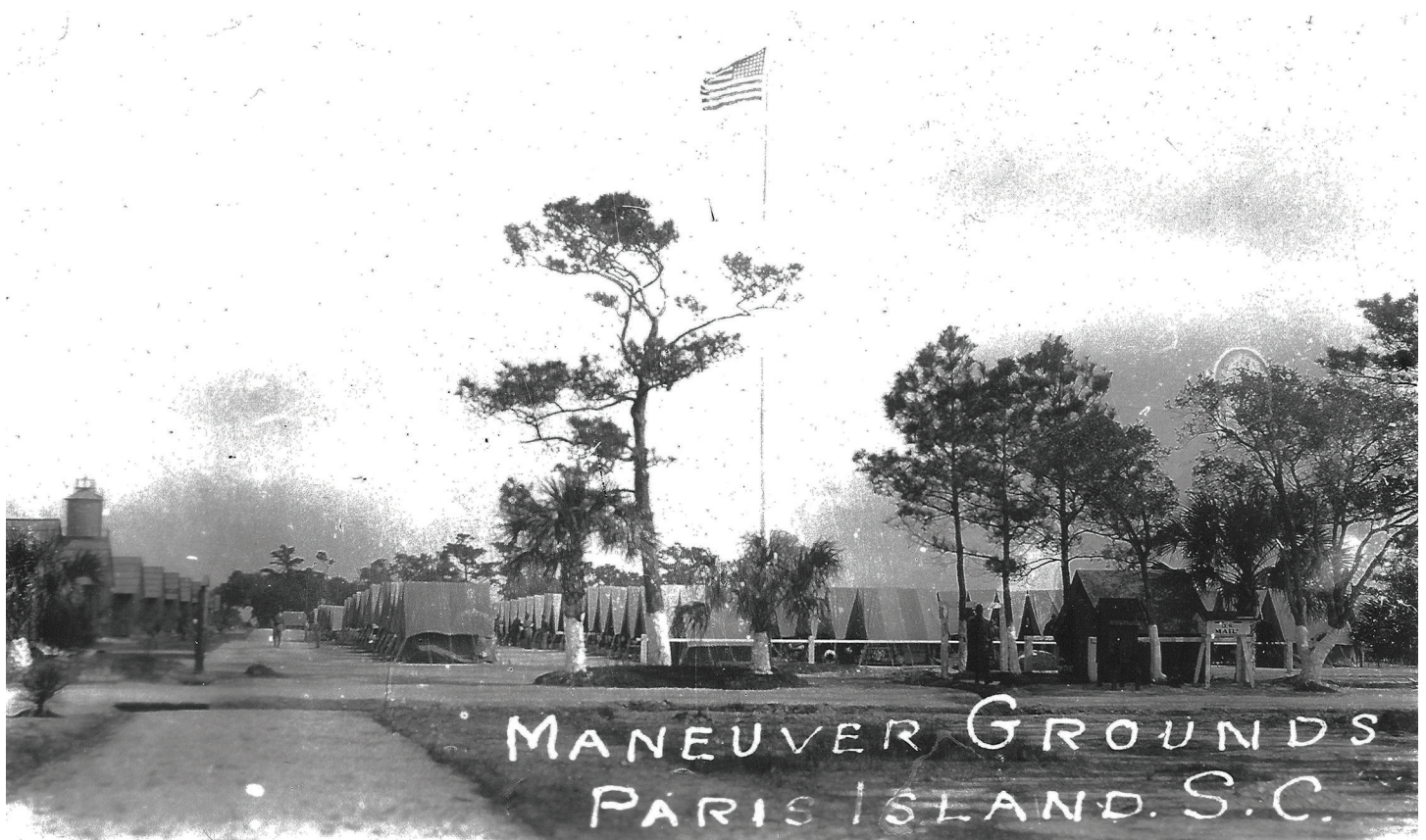


Figure 5: Another view of the Maneuver Grounds at Parris Island in 1918. (From a postcard)